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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses nonverbal communication and its implications and relevance for teachers. The first form of nonverbal language is proxemics, which describes the physical arrangement of space within a classroom and the space we allow between ourselves and others. The second form, coverbal behavior, describes physical movement, such as gestures, eye movements, and posture. The third, paralanguage, is a way of classifying verbal non-language, such as voice tone, rate of speech, pauses, disfluencies, and non-language sounds. The implications of nonverbal behavior are important to classroom teachers. Students can infer from nonverbal language that a teacher is warm and caring, empathetic, and enthusiastic. By modeling certain nonverbal behaviors, teachers can demonstrate the code of conduct they expect in their classrooms. Finally, nonverbal language can indicate the teacher's expectations for students. (Contains 6 references.) (SLD)

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ED 363 331

Nonverbal Language and Its Implications for Teachers

by
Richard Couch

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What nonverbal messages do teachers send to students? What do students infer from nonverbal behaviors - correctly or incorrectly - about their teachers? Is he a warm, caring person? Is she empathetic? Is he enthusiastic? Does she love her work? Attitudes, values, motives and intentions can be evaluated based on nonverbal behaviors. Body language is often more sincere and honest than what comes out of a person's mouth. Salespeople have known this for years: "dress for success," "firm handshake," "stand up straight and look the client in the eye." Teachers, similarly, can benefit from a clear understanding of nonverbal communication. After all, they also have something to sell to their students. This article addresses three types of nonverbal communication, the implications and the relevance of each for classroom teachers.

Two Channels of Communication

There are two channels of human communication: verbal and nonverbal. Our nonverbal messages are transmitted without spoken words or in addition to spoken words. There are three distinct categories of nonverbal communication: proxemics, coverbal behavior, and paralanguage. See Figure 1.

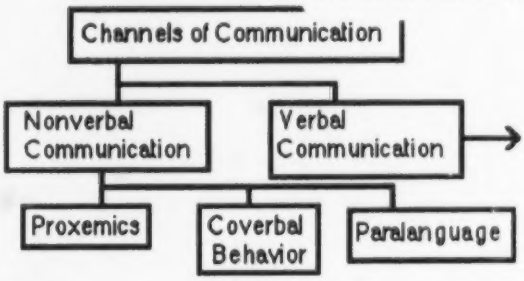

Figure 1. Communication Channels

Proxemics describes the physical arrangement of space within a classroom and the space we allow between ourselves and others, i.e. interpersonal space. Coverbal behavior describes physical movement such as gestures, facial expressions, eye gaze, directness of body orientation, and posture. Paralanguage is a way of classifying verbal nonlanguage such as voice tone, rate of speech, pauses, disfluencies such as "um," "uh," "er," "o.k.," "like," and nonlanguage sounds such as giggles and yawns (Kauchak and Eggen, 1989).

No matter what we may be verbally expressing in a given

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situation, our body language will communicate our attitudes, feelings and other inferential messages. While verbal communication helps us respond to abstract ideas and concepts, nonverbal communication sends a much more concrete message.

The credibility of a message was studied by Mehrabian and Ferris (1967). They found that only seven percent (7%) of a message's credibility was communicated through words, that is, verbal communication. However, 38% was communicated by the tone, pitch, variation, of the voice which is paralanguage. The last 55% of the credibility of the message was transmitted via coverbal behavior. In other words, the message sent via gestures, eye contact, posture, facial expressions, and so forth is eight times more credible than the verbal message.

We have all been in a social situation where we are talking to someone and that person keeps looking at another group of people while talking to us. No matter what that person says (verbally), she cannot convince us that she would rather be here than over there. Her nonverbal language sends a different message than her verbal language. This is called incongruent communication. It often is played out in the classroom as, "do as I say not as I do." A teacher can say to his students, " I love you guys." or "I respect everyone in this room." However, if the nonverbal language does not communicate the same message, then the students will clearly understand the hypocracy of the words. Before discussing the implications of nonverbal communications to the classroom teachers, it is important to understand each of the nonverbal channels of communications and their potential effects in the classroom.

Proxemics

An understanding of proxemics can help the teacher in several ways. Teachers often utilize the arrangement of the classroom and their location within the classroom as a teaching tool.

Teachers sometimes physically separate themselves from the class with a negative effect. By setting up a concrete barrier, either a desk or a podium, between themselves and the students, teachers are sending two nonverbal messages. One message is that I am in charge here; this is not a democracy. The second message is that I have the knowledge and I give it out at my whim. The teacher may not even be aware of the messages he is sending. But neither message is conducive to building a good learning community.

Another example of proxemics which can help teachers in their relationship to students is the arrangement of the student chairs. If the teacher is included in a circle at the same eye level, that is, she is included as a member of the group by sitting in the circle with students, then students may infer that the

teacher is also learning, therefore, is part of a learning community. This is not only a good message to be sending to the students, it also helps the teacher become a facilitator of learning rather than a dispenser of information.

Another example of the use of proxemics for the teacher is the location of the teacher when helping students do seatwork. If the teacher stands, hovering over a student, that sends a completely different nonverbal message than crouching down to the student's eye-level to help. The first position is one of power; the second is one of collaboration.

Finally, the knowledge of proxemics can help a teacher in the management of classroom discipline. If two students are talking in the back of the room, it is a much more powerful message to move to the location of the disturbance than to yell at the students from across the room or from a seated position at your desk. Even walking to a position which is very close and may seem to be invading a student's space can help solve some classroom management problems.

Some-times a touch will indicate a feeling of warmth, however, the teacher must be careful about touching students - know your students before touching them. Be proactive in the nonverbal messages that you send. In other words, being able to use the space in the classroom and your location in that space to your advantage, can eliminate a lot of discipline problems in the classroom.

Coverbal Behavior

Coverbal behaviors are the nonverbal messages conveyed by eye contact, gestures, facial expression and posture. When a teacher leans on a podium and rests his chin on his palm, the nonverbal message being sent to a roomful of students is that the teacher is bored with the subject matter or is not very excited about his students. Eye contact can demonstrate a sincere desire to communicate with students. It helps to establish a relationship with the student on a personal level. If you look at students when you ask questions, you can also get feedback on their understanding - the light is either on or off. Making eye contact can also send a meaningful message to those students who are talking in the back of the room. Perhaps making eye contact is enough to stop idle chatter. On the other hand, if you say something with your back to the student, that sends a different message, it indicates that you are not very serious about getting them to stop talking.

Coverbal behavior can send negative messages as well. Imagine the following scene: you are sitting at your desk, a student comes up to you, you glance up and continue to work ignoring their need to talk to you. That nonverbal communication sends a clear message to the student that what you are doing is more important. Simply recognizing the student and telling him that

you will be with him in a minute can send a much more positive message. Coverbal language can be beneficial or it can be a problem for teachers if they are unaware of the implications of their behavior.

Gestures can convey a love of the students and a love of the content. Enthusiastic teachers display many of the coverbal behaviors. Enthusiasm will be elaborated on in a following section. One of the most obvious nonverbal messages sent by students when they are tired or bored is chin on hand, slouched in chair, or arms folded on chest, scowling. By being aware of these signals we can learn to vary teaching strategies which allow us to reach more students more often.

Paralanguage

Although considered nonverbal communication, paralanguage can send powerful messages. The constant use of "um" or "er" or "uh" can mean many things. It can mean I'm nervous or I'm unprepared or I'm ill-suited for this task. Students can infer from this nonverbal behavior that the teacher does not have a good command of the English language and even that the teacher uses colloquialisms to be more like the students. We have all had teachers whose paralanguage is distracting. Many stories have been told through the years about students who count the number of "uh's" just to stay awake in a class. An understanding of paralanguage is extremely important. Although disfluencies are very difficult to overcome, these nonverbal sounds can be powerful indicators of messages you may not want the students to receive.

The first step in overcoming disfluencies is to be aware that you utter them. Further steps include: get more experience presenting to a group so that you are not as nervous and will avoid saying "uh" or "er." Always be prepared so that you don't indicate through paralanguage that you are not prepared. Avoid colloquialisms. And finally, avoid using a constant time filler like "o.k." or "like."

Implications of Nonverbal Language

The implications of nonverbal behavior are important to classroom teachers. Students can infer from this nonverbal language that a teacher is warm and caring, empathetic, and enthusiastic.

Additionally, by modeling certain nonverbal behaviors teachers can demonstrate the code of conduct they expect in their classrooms. Finally, nonverbal language can indicate the teacher's expectations for her students.

Warmth, Caring and Empathy

Warmth and caring is the teacher's ability to demonstrate he or she cares about the student as a person. Students don't like being considered a number any more than do the rest of us. An honest concern for students is demonstrated in

many nonverbal as well as verbal ways. A smile, a nod of the head, a wink, a hug, a pat on the back, a "high five" all indicate that the teacher cares about his or her students. Honesty is the key. As many actors know, the action must come from the inside. That is to say, the motivation comes from the sincere belief of the character. Teachers cannot "fake it" when it comes to caring and providing warmth for their students. They shouldn't even try.

Empathy is that skill which allows a teacher to put himself or herself in the student's position. Empathy can be demonstrated in nonverbal ways. However, each of these teacher attributes is highly individualistic and it is impossible to give a formula for demonstrating each nonverbally.

Classroom management can be the most fertile ground for nonverbal communication. Being empathetic can mean a variety of things including understanding that you were a student once yourself. The opposite of the empathetic behavior is the adversarial behavior that many teachers establish. In this case the teacher's nonverbal behavior is often counter-productive to a safe learning environment.

Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm seems to be one of those nonverbal teaching skills which would be impossible to teach. However, Collins (1978) created an operational definition consisting of the following eight behaviors:

1. Varied vocal delivery;
2. Animated eyes, including raised eyebrows and consistent eye contact;
3. Frequent gesturing with the head, arms, and body;
4. Large body movements and change in position;
5. Demonstrative and vibrant facial expressions;
6. Descriptive and varied word selection;
7. Acceptance of ideas and feelings with vigor and animation;
8. High energy level, vitality, drive, and spirit.

Notice that of these eight characteristics only number one and number six are verbally communicated. The remainder are *demonstrated nonverbally*. Again, enthusiasm, like caring, warmth, and empathy, comes from inside the teacher. It comes from a love of the subject matter and a love of the students. Does being enthusiastic mean that we all have to get up on our desks to emphasize an important point? Certainly not. Each teacher has a different personality - thank goodness. Students have different learning styles just as teachers have different teaching styles. False enthusiasm is obvious to students and can distract from learning. One thing is clear from the research; student learning is directly related to the amount of time they spend engaged with the content. A teacher who loves her content and who loves her students will engage those students and motivate them to want to learn.

Modeling

When a person imitates a behavior or attitude, it is called modeling. Hopefully, the teacher is the model for many nonverbal student behaviors. By being polite and respectful to all of his students the teacher models the kinds of nonverbal and verbal behavior he would like from his students. When he touches "the nerd" or "the geek" on the shoulder just like he touches the most popular student, that nonverbal behavior demonstrates an acceptance of all people. Unfortunately, negative behavior is frequently modeled as well. Violence on television and at home is one model that is hard to overcome by a safe classroom - corporal punishment is still modeled in some schools.

Often our nonverbal behavior is incongruent with our verbal message. One study demonstrated the effect of incongruent communication (Bryan and Walbeck, 1970). These researchers showed that when a behavior was modeled and then the opposite behavior was verbally indicated, students imitated the nonverbal rather than the verbal behavior. If we send incongruent messages, our spoken words mean very little. What kinds of behaviors do teachers model which they want their students to copy? There are many of them. The teacher reads during reading time, writes in a journal when the students are expected to write in a journal, then shares the writing with her students. The teacher cleans up after herself at lunch; she shares her supplies in art class. The teacher laughs at her own mistakes and never at another person's mistakes. These are only a few examples; The reader can generate many more. Modeling is a very powerful nonverbal tool available to the teacher.

Expectations

Expectations can be considered a self-fulfilling prophecy for the classroom teacher. Every teacher, by now, is familiar with the controversial study and book entitled *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). In their study the authors found that by manipulating teacher expectations students would perform at the expected levels. Students performed at high levels when teachers expected them to perform at high levels. The controversy came from a lack of replication in further studies. But recent studies have indicated that, in some cases, teacher expectations are powerful.

Brophy and Evertson (1970) found that if a teacher believes students can and will learn, then the students achieve at higher levels than those students whose teachers don't believe they can achieve. Teachers often expend less effort on perceived low achievers, ask fewer questions, do less prompting, give them less time to answer, give less praise than to high achievers, ask higher level questions of high achievers, ask lower level, factual questions to perceived low achievers.

In terms of nonverbal behavior, what kinds of things can a teacher do to indicate that she has high expectations for her students? Call on all students equally and be consist in nonverbal communication to all students. Use good prompting techniques for all students and give verbal an nonverbal praise such as "thumbs up" or the "O.K." hand signal or "high five" to all students. Make eye contact with all students and be aware that your body position is important. Face the student who is answering the question; never "dismiss them" in any way, especially nonverbally by turning your back or by not looking at them as they answer a question. Change the seating arrangement so that everyone "gets" to sit in the front seats or arrange your class in a circle. Try to address low achievers on a personal level every day. This demonstrates warmth, empathy, and high expectations. It models good behavior to the rest of the students, saying, in effect, "I care about all of you students and you should care about each other as well." And finally, try to live by the principles, attitudes and values that you want your students to live by (Kauchak and Eggen, 1989).

Often our body language has more impact on our students than what we say. Knowing that nonverbal communication can express so much meaning will allow us to start reflecting upon and analyzing our own behavior. It will allow us to explore new nonverbal behaviors. If we want to make a difference in our student's lives we must improve our ability to communicate nonverbally. It is recommended that the reader continue to explore ways which they can nonverbally, as well as verbally, create a safe environment and at the same time enhance their students' learning.

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